

The Impact of Work Autonomy on Job satisfaction of Academic Staff: An Empirical Examination of Government Universities in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study intends to examine whether work autonomy impacts academic staff members' job satisfaction of state universities in Sri Lanka. As the research approach, a quantitative approach was employed. In collecting data, a structured questionnaire was used to collect responses from fifteen government universities in Sri Lanka. The multi-stage stratified random sampling method was applied to select a representative sample; and 423 usable questionnaires deemed appropriate for analysis were selected. The validity and reliability tests indicated that the measurement scales met the acceptable standards. The t-test and One-way ANOVA results indicated that depending on the selected demographic factors, current working status, gender, age, and highest level of education the perception on work autonomy of the academic staff members in state universities in Sri Lanka differs. Nevertheless, it was found that marital status and number of children had no impact on the perception of work autonomy. In terms of the regression analysis conducted, it was found out that the work autonomy was a highly significant factor affecting the academic staff members' overall job satisfaction of state universities in Sri Lanka. This finding is expected to have significant policy implications.

Kew wards: Job satisfaction, Work Autonomy, Academic staff members, Government Universities

JEL Classification: D 23

1. Background of the study

Job satisfaction is an elusive and complex concept that has been a subject of intense research since the appearance of organizational studies (Duong, 2013). Veitch et al. (2007) defined job satisfaction “is a particular view of the work with which employees view their job and this view is affected by favorable and unfavorable feelings and attachments of one’s work.” On the other hand, Gurinder and Gursharan (2010) indicate that job satisfaction “is the positive emotional response to the job situation resulting from attaining what the employee wants from the job”. Further, Nguni et al. (2006a) view job satisfaction “as a magnificent or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences and as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one’s job values”. Based on these definitions it is apparent that the concept of job satisfaction is quite intricate and subjective.

The brilliance of faculty members directly contributes to the excellence of a university and higher education system of a nation provides the basis of almost all professional careers. Further, Amarasena et al. (2015) argue that the higher education system plays a vital part in the socio-economic development process of a nation. They further state that to face the challenges of globalization, developing countries as Sri Lanka should be concerned of rapidly changing environment and technology and should be more adaptive to such dynamic trends. Moreover, they indicate that in a nation’s development and affluence, a quality higher education system has become a vital element. It is observed that the leaders in the globalized world are the countries who had paid a great focus on their higher education systems, and they had structurally and technologically reformed themselves to utilize their intellectual capital and resources on a consistent basis. In becoming market leaders of innovation, a nation with quality institutions staffed with talented and creative academics is observed to be highly instrumental. Thus, job satisfaction of such staff members is vital aspect and is an area of research that is of paramount importance; this being due to higher job satisfaction of the staff members leads to higher productivity and performance as indicated in the extant research. Saleem (2010) indicates that overall job satisfaction of academic staff members could be used to enhance the productivity levels in developing countries as Pakistan. However, the authors note that although there are several studies on job satisfaction of academic staff members in universities are done in the contexts of developed countries, there is a dearth of studies performed in developing countries like Sri Lanka, and accordingly establish that such studies are of high importance. Oshagbemi (2003) finds that organizations aspire for employee job satisfaction as a vital attribute. Garcia-Bernal et al. (2005) argue that to gain enhanced competitive advantages and success of organizations, organizations should have job satisfaction as its key objective, which they infer based on extant literature. Extant research finds many reasons to examine faculty staff members’ job satisfaction, and findings of such research indicates that the objectives of

the higher education cannot be achieved if there is lower degree of job satisfaction among academicians (Eyupoglu and Saner, 2009). Satisfied employees have lower rates of both turnover and absenteeism. Job satisfaction is also significantly linked to employee absenteeism (Hackett and Guion, 1985). Joarder and Sharif (2011), (Akhtar et al., 2008) also indicate that higher performance; higher organizational productivity and lower labor turnover are associated with job satisfaction. On the other hand, Chen et al. (2006) finds that higher absenteeism and greater labor turnover is observed among employees who are dissatisfied.

Despite its importance, Munhurrin et al. (2009) argue that although job satisfaction should not be disregarded, only a very few organizations consider it seriously. The researchers note that there is a growing research interest in the job satisfaction of academicians in educational establishments, despite most of the extant research pertains to profit oriented manufacturing and service entities. Mustapha, (2013) claims that the reason for such increased attention is due to the labor intensiveness and budgets being devoted to the staff members of such institutions, and the effectiveness is based on the staff members. Consequently, Küskü (2003) explained that in the context of higher education entities, job satisfaction could be considered a highly significant issue. Furthermore, Syed et al. (2012) found that in terms of improving the effectiveness and efficacy of higher educational system, the university academic members' job satisfaction is a vital aspect of higher education.

The findings of Karim (2008) indicates that there are a many number of factors that influence job satisfaction. He stated that several variables significantly correlate with job satisfaction such as job autonomy, organizational tenure, effective commitment, job performance, role clarity, and role conflict. Jaafar et al. (2006) argued that based on the Herzberg's theory of two factors, both hygiene (i.e., achievement, recognition for achievement, responsibility, the work itself, growth or advancement) and motivator factors (salary, status, security, company policy and administration, working conditions, supervision, interpersonal relationships) highly influence job satisfaction. Related to the job satisfaction among academic staff, Chimanikire et al. (2007) found that inadequate salaries, high amount of allowances, workload, loans to purchase houses and cars are highly influential factors for job satisfaction of most academic members in tertiary education entities in Zimbabwe. In this study, the important construct of work autonomy is examined for its impact on the academic staff members' overall job satisfaction in state universities in Sri Lanka.

1.1 Research Questions and Objectives

There are two main research questions addressed in this study;

- i. How does the work autonomy of academic staff members of Sri Lankan government universities differs based on selected demographic variables?

- ii. How the work autonomy has a significant impact on the job satisfaction of academic faculty members of government universities in Sri Lanka?

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether the work autonomy impacts job satisfaction of academic staff members in the government universities in Sri Lanka. Based on this main purpose, the following research objectives were formulated for this study.

- i. To examine whether the work autonomy of academic staff members of Sri Lankan government universities differs based on selected demographic variables.
- ii. To investigate whether, the work autonomy has a significant impact on the job satisfaction of academic faculty members of government universities in Sri Lanka.

This research paper is structured as follows: section two elaborates the literature review; the third section discusses research methodology adopted; the fourth section presents information on the analysis of data and findings gained out of it, and the final section provides the conclusion while suggesting recommendations. The next section discusses the related extant literature pertaining to these objectives.

2. Literature Review

This section discusses alternative definitions on job satisfaction as well as the relationships among, overall job satisfaction of academic members, work autonomy and demographic factors.

2.1 Job Satisfaction

Akehurst et al. (2009) defined job satisfaction as “how content an individual is with his or her job or the contentment arising out of the interplay of employee’s positive and negative feelings towards his or her job”. Other way around, Okokoyo (2006) indicated that, “job satisfaction in relation to one’s occupation means the overall feeling about career in terms of specific outcomes of the job such as productivity and job performance”. Furthermore, Zainudin et al. (2010) argued that, job satisfaction is an significant area in an any organizations. On the other hand, Nguni et al. (2006b) defined job satisfaction as “pleasurable or positive emotional state results from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences and as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one’s job values”. Thus, by looking at these definitions, it is observed that there is no single universal definition, but has a common underlying theme for the construct, job satisfaction.

2.2 Work Autonomy and Job Satisfaction

Extant literature indicates that there are several factors that could impact job satisfaction of employees including work autonomy. Castillo and Cano (2004) found that work autonomy was the most motivating aspect for universities faculty member job satisfaction and also highlighted that ‘work itself’ was the characteristic most satisfying, and ‘working conditions’ being the least satisfying characteristic of their jobs. Studies such as Parker and Wall (1998) and Neuman

et al. (1989), state that employee satisfaction is consistently linked with the job autonomy. In addition, in terms of professional development, research (Hart and Rotem, 1995, Manley, 1995) also has indicated that work autonomy could be considered as an essential element. In indicating the importance of work autonomy, Yunki (1999) in his research emphasizes that such autonomy is the most significant predictor of employee job satisfaction.

On the other hand, autonomy and flexibility have been identified as key elements in entering and staying as an academician (Bellamy et al., 2003). Malik (2009) asserted that the work itself and advancement were highly correlated with faculty job satisfaction. Intrinsic factors such as responsibility and the satisfaction with work itself arise from the human ability to personally advance and grow (Malik, 2011). Robbins et al. (2003) in their study highlights that when a job provides an opportunity for individuals with tasks that stimulate, growth opportunities for personal growth and learning, and the opportunity to be accountable for results, such provides a basis for enhanced job satisfaction. Further, Robbins (2005) indicates that jobs that provide chances for using skills and abilities, diversity of tasks, independence and feedback of their performance tend to be preferred by the employees. Houston et al. (2006) found that university staff members were moderately satisfied with the freedom to choose their own method of work, their level of responsibility, and the amount of variety in their job. More specifically, in the context of public higher education, Paul & Phua, (2011) found that the autonomy and flexibility that the job offered had a positive influence over the job satisfaction of academicians.

Considering the information discussed above, the following hypothesis is developed and proposed to be tested in this study:

H₁: Work autonomy will associate positively with job satisfaction of academic staff members of Sri Lankan government universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Population and Sample

In this study, the population is considered to be all academic staff members of government universities in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, there are fifteen government universities under the University Grant Commission (University Grants Commission, 2013). There are also few private universities and small number of academic staff members and a lesser number of students enrolled in these universities. Hence, the higher education system is dominant by the government universities in the Sri Lankan context. The total academicians in the accessible population is nearly 5200 (University Grants Commission, 2013) in the all government universities. The sample consisted of male and female academic staff members, professors, senior lecturers and lecturers of all government universities. The multi-stage stratified random

sampling method was used to select respondents for the study, which consisted of 423 academicians.

3.2 Data Collection

Following the dominant research strategy in the extant literature (Ali, 2009; Zaman, Jahan, & Mahmud, 2014), a questionnaire method was used as a primary tool of data collection, which is based on the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) (Weiss et al., 1967), thus ensuring validity and reliability requirements. This study used a five point Likert scale in the questionnaire; and five -point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 = “strongly disagree” and 5 = “strongly agree”. As secondary tools of data collection, journal articles and books were used for this study.

3.3 Analysis Strategy

Based on the extant literature, as a data analysis strategy, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, t-tests (to compare two groups), One-way ANOVA (to compare more than two groups) were used and specifically, in testing the research hypothesis indicated in this study, a multiple regression analysis was utilized. The normality of data was ensured by using the values on Skewness and Kurtosis (Chinna et al., 2012), and these values were within the tolerable limits (see Kline, 2005). Furthermore, Mardia coefficient (Chinna et al., 2012) was used to ensure the multivariate normality and they were also within the tolerable limits. The model which constructed based on the related extant literature, which is proposed to be tested using the multiple linear regression analysis is as follows:

$$OS = \alpha + \beta_1 WA + \beta_2 ControlVars + \beta_3 DemoVars + \varepsilon \quad (\text{Model 1})$$

OS: Overall job satisfaction of academic staff members of government universities (measured based on the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) (Weiss et al., 1967)).

WA: Work Autonomy of academic staff members of government universities.¹

Control Vars: Work Load and Work Environment of academic staff members of state universities.

Demo Vars: Current Working Status, Gender, Age, Highest level of Education, Marital Status and Number of Children of Academic staff members of state universities.²

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Work Autonomy Construct

There are 8 items in the work autonomy (WA) construct (sub-questions). The Cronbach's Alpha value for the work force construct was .825 reflecting that the measured items have high internal reliability and consistency. Overall, the inter-item correlation values for performance trait items were above .3, thus all items were consistent with the construct (Hair et al., 1998).

¹ See Section 4.1 for details.

² The different categories of the demographic variables are depicted in Table 3 in page 7.

Thus, no any item needed to be dropped. The inter-item correlation values are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Inter-item correlation values for items in Work Autonomy

	WA1	WA2	WA3	WA4	WA5	WA6	WA7	WA8
WA1	-							
WA2	.440	-						
WA3	.366	.389	-					
WA4	.370	.325	.464	-				
WA5	.379	.267	.502	.662	-			
WA6	.362	.287	.323	.306	.319	-		
WA7	.376	.267	.353	.508	.515	.401	-	
WA8	.343	.297	.271	.319	.368	.373	.340	-

WA1: I have high degree of independence associated with my work roles. WA2: The authority I have to make suggestions about what courses I teach. WA3: I am involved in decision making group that affects my job. WA4: My leaders listen to my ideas. WA5: My views and participation are valued by others. WA6: I have freedom to do outside consulting. WA7: I can freely express my opinion and it is valued by the university. WA8: I have freedom to work with students as an adviser.

(Source: Researcher's Field Survey Report, 2015)

In Table 1, the correlation coefficients for all items are in between 0.3 and 0.9. In the Factor Analysis, the KMO value was 0.856, which is considered to be good. In this analysis, a single factor was extracted that explained 45.61% of the variance in the 8 items. Thus, the mean for the 8 items was computed and used as WA (Work Autonomy) to be used in further analysis explained below.

4.2 t-test and One-way ANOVA tests for Work Autonomy

This section describes the differences between/among the work autonomy compared with selected demographic variables, i.e., Current Working Status, Gender, Age, Highest level of education, Marital Status and Number of Children.

Table 2 depicts the results for the t-test and One-way ANOVA tests for Work Autonomy compared with the selected demographic variables. Under the current working status, there is a significant ($p < .01$) difference among all the groups ('Professor' ($M=3.833$), 'Senior Lecturer' ($M=3.495$) and 'Lecturer' ($M=3.314$) categories). In terms of gender, results indicate that the male staff members ($M=3.599$) and female staff members ($M=3.332$) are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different. Accordingly, male faculty members are more satisfied with the work autonomy they have than the female counterpart. In terms of age, significant difference between groups: 'Less than 30 years' ($M=3.197$) and ' $30 \leq \text{Years} < 40$ ' ($M=3.469$) are statistically significantly ($p < .05$) different. Further, age in between 'Less than 30 years' ($M=3.197$) and ' $50 \leq \text{Years} < 60$ ' ($M=3.625$) years are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different. Moreover, it is noted that age 'less than 30 years' ($M=3.197$) and 'over 60 years' ($M=3.852$) are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different. Under the highest level of education only groups: 'Bachelor's Degree' ($M=3.284$) and 'Doctoral Degree' ($M=3.538$) are statistically significantly ($p < .05$) different. However, the marital status and number of children

demographic variables do not depict a significant difference among the groups ($p > .05$) in terms of work autonomy.

Table 2: t-test and One-way ANOVA for Work Autonomy

Groups	Mean Values	t-test/One-way ANOVA	Difference
<i>Current working status:</i> 1. Professor 2. Senior Lecturer 3. Lecturer	3.833 3.495 3.314	F-value: 14.125***	Groups: 'Professor' and 'Senior Lecturer' categories are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different. 'Professor' and 'Lecturer' categories are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different. 'Senior lecturers' and 'lecturers' categories are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different.
<i>Gender:</i> 1. Male 2. Female	3.599 3.332	t-value: -4.659***	Male and female groups: are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different.
<i>Age:</i> 1. Less than 30 years 2. 30 ≤ Years < 40 3. 40 ≤ Years < 50 4. 50 ≤ Years < 60 5. Over 60 years	3.197 3.469 3.447 3.625 3.852	F-value: 6.230***	Groups: 'Less than 30 years' and '30 ≤ Years < 40' are statistically significantly ($p < .05$) different. 'Less than 30 years' and '50 ≤ Years < 60 years' are statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different. 'Less than 30 years', and 'Over 60 years' statistically significantly ($p < .01$) different.
<i>Highest level of education:</i> 1. Bachelor's Degree 2. Master's Degree (MBA/MSc) 3. Doctoral Degree 4. Other	3.284 3.436 3.538 3.579	F-value: 3.440***	Only groups: 'Bachelor's Degree' and 'Doctoral Degree' are statistically significantly ($p < .05$) different.
<i>Marital status:</i> 1. Married 2. Unmarried 3. Divorced/widowed	3.491 3.333 3.500	F-value: 1.840	No significant difference among the groups ($p > .05$)
<i>Number of children:</i> 1. None 2. One 3. Two 4. Three 5. Four 6. Five	3.406 3.497 3.477 3.525 3.958 0.000	F-value: 0.988	No significant difference among the groups ($p > .05$)

(Source: Researcher's Field Survey Report, 2015)

4.3 Results from Multivariate Regression Analysis

The purpose of multivariate linear regression analysis is to help to understand the prediction between more than two quantitative variables. Sekaran and Bougie (2010) elaborate that multivariate linear regression analysis is a method of objectively evaluating the level and the nature of the association between the independent and the dependent variables. This study mainly used multivariate linear regression analysis to evaluate how well the construct, work

autonomy (WA) predicted the overall job satisfaction (OS) of the Sri Lankan government university academicians.

In Table 3, the *p*-value (sig.) for WA (Work Autonomy) is less than 1% and positive, which indicates a highly positive statistical association between the work autonomy and job satisfaction of academicians in the government universities in Sri Lanka. Thus, the hypothesis indicated in Section 2.2 of this study is confirmed. This finding is consistent with the findings of Houston et al. (2006) and Paul & Phua, (2011) as indicated in the Section 2.2 of this study. Further, the R-square value is 0.44; meaning that about 44% of the variation in overall job satisfaction (OS) is explained by the selected independent variables including work autonomy. The highest VIF value is well below 10, and hence, there is no problem of multicollinearity (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010), (Tabachnick et al., 2007). In the residual plot diagram (not depicted) all the points were within ± 3 and were distributed randomly. The residuals were symmetrical around the value of 0.

Table 3: The Results from Regression Analysis

Model 1					
(Dependent Variable: <i>Overall Job Satisfaction</i>)					
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Collinearity Diagnostics</i>	
				<i>Tolerance</i>	<i>VIF</i>
<i>Work Load</i>	0.269***	.039	6.836	.745	1.341
<i>Work Autonomy</i>	0.334***	.041	8.186	.738	1.354
<i>Work Environment</i>	0.169***	.033	5.100	.769	1.300
<i>Current working status – Senior Lecturer</i>	-0.094	.089	-1.061	.230	4.355
<i>Current working status –Lecturer</i>	-0.088	.110	-.797	.163	6.153
<i>Gender- Female</i>	-0.121***	.045	-2.684	.881	1.135
<i>Age: 30 ≤ Years < 40</i>	-0.162*	.097	-1.678	.203	4.918
<i>Age: 40 ≤ Years < 50</i>	-0.156	.115	-1.360	.177	5.650
<i>Age: 50 ≤ Years < 60</i>	-0.227*	.123	-1.847	.199	5.037
<i>Age: Over 60Years</i>	-0.231	.171	-1.354	.421	2.377
<i>Master's Degree</i>	0.064	.091	.697	.245	4.087
<i>Doctoral Degree</i>	-0.019	.103	-.188	.169	5.901
<i>Education-Other</i>	-0.101	.122	-.830	.418	2.394
<i>Marital Status – Unmarried</i>	0.015	.076	.195	.622	1.609
<i>Marital Status - Divorced/widowed</i>	0.186	.173	1.074	.918	1.089
<i>Children – 1 Child</i>	0.131*	.068	1.910	.482	2.074
<i>Children – 2 Children</i>	0.184***	.070	2.649	.415	2.411
<i>Children – 3 Children</i>	0.293***	.098	2.999	.617	1.621
<i>Children – 4 Children</i>	-0.172	.292	-.589	.746	1.341
<i>Intercept</i>	1.551***	.214	7.265		
<i>F-value</i>			16.657***		
<i>R²</i>			44%		
<i>N</i>			423		

5. Conclusion

It is observed in the extant literature that few research studies on job satisfaction of academicians have been conducted in the context developing countries. Therefore, there is a need for more research studies from developing countries like Sri Lanka. Thus, this study made an attempt to identify overall level of job satisfaction and one of the important factors (i.e.,

work autonomy) affecting job satisfaction of academic faculty staff of state universities in Sri Lanka.

In general, there are so many factors affecting for job satisfaction of academic staff in universities; however, this study mainly considered work autonomy as the main determinant of overall job satisfaction. The t-test and One-way ANOVA results indicated that depending on the demographic factors: current working status, gender, age, and highest level of education the perception on work autonomy of the academic staff members in state universities in Sri Lanka differs. However, marital status and number of children was found to have no impact on the perception of work autonomy. These findings addressed the first objective of this study. The multivariate regression results indicated that the factor “work autonomy” has significant positive impact on the overall job satisfaction of academic staff members of state universities in Sri Lanka, which confirms the hypothesis established in Section 2.2, and addresses the second objective of this study. This finding is expected to have significant policy implications and the relevant authorities should use work autonomy as an important factor within the university to enhance the academic overall job satisfaction among the staff members.

It should be noted that there are a few limitations in the present study and the findings and related conclusions should be interpreted, cautiously. Firstly, the study was conducted only in the Sri Lanka context; and therefore, the findings and related conclusions are unable to be compared with rest of the other countries in the Asia region and world. Secondly, consider more affecting factors of job satisfaction among university academic faculty members.

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